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Artists at school—Developing pupils' social interaction through artist-teacher co-operation

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Abstract

The research is a case study of teacher-artist co-operation in one primary school in a metropolitan area in Finland. In this case study, the artists worked at school with teachers and learning at the school was planned through arts-based, co-operative teamwork.

The aim of this study is to evaluate how social skills were developed during the project. The research task was to determine whether the long-term artist pedagogy and co-operation at school have any significant connection to the social skills and behaviour of the pupils. Data has been collected through teacher-based evaluations of pupils' social skills during the school days and by interviewing the artists and teachers. Primary school teachers were asked to describe the behaviour and verbalisation of the pupils. Altogether 32 pupils from 3rd grade participated in this case study. Half of the pupils participated in an artist's class and half formed the control group. The teachers' descriptions of the pupils' behaviour were analysed. The artist group also used some music and drama. Two artists worked with the test group weekly during a period of six months. The measures used were Likert-based evaluation scores of pupils' social behaviour in everyday situations at school.

According to the results, the artist-teacher co-operation and learning through the arts are worthwhile tools to develop pupil's social skills and learning in Finnish schools.

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Keywords: learning through the arts, artist-teacher co-operation, pupils' social skills, learning environments

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1. Introduction and research review

Here introduce the paper, and put a nomenclature if necessary, in a box with the same font size as the rest of the paper. The paragraphs continue from here and are only separated by headings, subheadings, images and formulae. The section headings are arranged by numbers, bold and 10 pt. Here follows further instructions for authors.

This case study is a part of the MUS-E® in Finland programme. This programme has been sponsored with the help of the Ministry of Education. Two artists work at the primary schools during the whole school year in the Helsinki metropolitan area where support is most needed because of the social challenges of immigrant and other families. The artists in the school programme began in 1991 when violinist and humanist Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) founded, together with Marianne Poncelet, the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation (IYMF) with its main office in Brussels, Belgium. Menuhin's vision was to develop long-term projects, with the aim of giving a voice to every child through artistic expressions in all its forms. The International Foundation is at the centre of this programme and coordinates a network of associations such as MUS-E®, that act as the national operators of its programmes in eleven European countries. The first aim of this programme reminds the political, cultural and educational institutions of the central place of art and creativity in all the processes of personal and societal development. Secondly, these artistic projects give a voice and increase intercultural sensitivity between all cultures present in Europe.

The MUS-E® programme introduces arts mainly in primary schools to develop children's creative powers and release their creative potential. It is hoped that this programme will prevent violence and racism through fostering harmony and a sense of aesthetics from the earliest age. Implemented in 11 countries, MUS-E® now involves around 55,000 children from 550 primary schools and 3,500 teachers, thanks to the support from the European Union and many national and regional governmental authorities and partners. Over 1,000 artists take part in the programme (Wichers & Poncelet 2011; Poncelet 2014).

According to Parker (1953), the artist in the school programme can help pupils to give form to their ideas either by explaining from their own artistic experiences or demonstrating through the arts. This kind of learning is enhanced by the artist's enthusiasm and skills. The aim of this study was to determine if there are any positive connections between the long-term artistic activity in primary school and the social behaviour of schoolchildren. There has been an effective and popular artist-teacher model in Reggio Emilia approach, especially in visual arts of early childhood education (e.g., Edwards etc., 1998), but unfortunately, this type of model is seldom used in educational settings of communal pre-schools or schools.

The Finnish school system is well known for its excellent PISA results. At the same time, the system struggles with bullying problems and the fact that many pupils are not getting along well at school. We believe that the development of social skills is one vital key to solving these problems. According to Lane Givner, & Pierson (2004), and Lori (2009), social skills may be affecting academic success, peer and family relationships and extracurricular and leisure activities. In Milsom's and Glanville's (2010) study, pupils with poor social skills were more likely to be the victims of bullying by their peers. Some longitudinal studies have shown the connection between behavioural and social difficulties and substandard academic achievement and the rate of school dropouts and unstable personal lifestyles (Bracken & Fischel, 2007; Lane et al., 2004).

There are some previous studies on long-term artistic activities connected with the developing social behaviour of children. Rabinowitch, Cross and Burnard (2013) tested a long-term musical group interaction programme for primary school children consisting of interactive musical games implementing various empathy-promoting musical components. The programme lasted for the entire school year and those children who participated in a long-term musical group interaction programme showed higher emotional empathy scores after the study compared to what they showed at the beginning, and higher scores than the control group at the end of the study. These findings showed the meaning of long-term musical activities at the primary school level in promoting positive social-emotional behaviour such as empathy.

Learning through the arts and integrating arts to everyday learning has an effective impact on pupils' attitudes towards learning. According to Rabkin and Redmond (2006), in arts-integrated classrooms, work more often clearly and meaningfully connects to pupils' own experiences and feelings. According to Ruokonen et al. (2014), when artists and teachers begin working together at school, they start from a school curriculum and often design lessons and units that connect subject matter to an arts project. Most often, they design learning some subject through the

arts, but an arts-based learning project can also be designed according to arts education principles. In this case study, language and writing were taught through the dance or social interaction through music and puppet theatre. For many years, there has been evidence and research concerning the better learning results and social behaviour when using arts and skills effectively in school education (Gunsberg, 1988; Kalliopuska & Ruokonen, 1993; Ruokonen, 1997; McClung, 2000; Freeman et al., 2003; Wilkins et al., 2003; Wright, 2006; Chen, 2014). Because not much has been done in practice, the MUS-E® artist in the school programme is still important to prove and develop the practices that could become natural co-operative practices in every preschool and school.

2. Study design and research question

The purpose of the research was to learn if the long-term artist-teacher co-operation and learning through the arts method have any positive connection with the social skills of the pupils on the primary school level. The research question was to determine whether artistic activities have any significant connection to the daily social behaviour and skills of the pupils compared to those pupils studying in same area in primary school at the same grade level, but without the artist-based learning programme.

Primary school teachers were asked to describe the behaviour and verbalisation of the pupils in everyday situations at school. Altogether 32 pupils from the 3rd grade participated in the study. Half of the pupils participated in an artist's class and half formed the control group. The teachers' descriptions of the pupils' behaviour were analysed.

3. Participants and the programme

Two Finnish MUS-E® artists worked with the test group weekly during a period of six months. In addition, the third artist of the puppet theatre group helped them. The learning was planned according to the 3rd grade basic education curriculum so that integrative arts education was a tool in learning. The artists used music, dance and drama in their integrative programme. Before Christmas, the pupils of the test group together with the artists participated in planning and acting in a drama play, which was presented at a local theatre. In this project-based learning, the forms of design learning and pupil-centred methods were used to write a script for the drama. In addition, dance, lights and darkness were used in a very effective way in the performance.

The school curriculum was enriched by singing, dancing, storytelling, listening to music, playing instruments, dancing, and playing with the puppets. The purpose of the arts educational learning programme was to involve pupils in their social skills and verbalisation through dancing, singing and acting, in order to achieve a holistic and enjoyable artistic experience.

The control group was the same type of 3rd grade class from the same kind of metropolitan area. The pre-evaluation chi-square test showed no significant connections between the demographic factors of the groups. Both schools were in the same area and the pupils were studying in the same grade. Of course, in this kind of case study all the environmental or family factors cannot be matched. Anyway, in both groups, there were the same kind of socio-economic family backgrounds and the same number of immigrant families (30%) was present in both groups. The groups were chosen so that in both groups there were 50% boys and 50% girls. The pre-evaluation t-test results showed that there were no significant differences in any evaluation section between the groups.

4. Methods

In this case study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The research methods included Likert-based evaluation scores of the pupils' pro-social skills and behaviour by Weir Duveen's and Kalliopuska's evaluation matrices. The class teachers who observed the pupils in their everyday situations did the evaluation. The evaluations were carried out before and after the MUS-E® artists' programme at school. The development of the pupils' social behaviour was examined based on the discrepancy between the pre-evaluation and post-evaluation measurements. The significance of the difference in mean points and discrepancy points was assessed with t-tests.

The artists and schoolteachers were interviewed to determine their experiences concerning the teacher-artist-co-operation and learning through the arts programme, and these were added to the results.

5. Results

The teachers made the evaluations before and after the school semester. When interviewing the teachers, we learned that these classes were especially challenging to their social behaviour and skills as well as their Finnish language skills because there were so many children from immigrant families, most of them came to Finland as refugees. According to the teachers, the artists working in classroom situations brought with them many new holistic ideas of learning through the arts and this seemed to be interesting and motivating to the pupils. The co-operative relationship between teacher and artist was challenging during the planning stages, but rewarding during the programme, according to the teachers and artists. The results of the evaluation show the positive impact of this kind of learning settings on the social skills of the pupils.

The t-test results of the discrepancy in points (post/pre-evaluation) showed significant differences in prosocial behaviour between the arts programme group (=test group) and the control group (see Table 1).

Table 1. The differences in discrepancy points between groups (t-test)

Group	M	SD	N	t	df	p
Test group	5.56	4.34	16			
				3.46	30	0.002
Control group	1.13	2.75	16			

There were altogether 20 dimensions of prosocial behaviour to evaluate and it can be seen from the results that the test group has developed significantly more in their social skills compared to the control group based on the teachers' evaluations. The most significant results were from the following sections: helpful behaviour ($t=2,42$, $p=0,022$); companionable behaviour ($t=3,00$, $p=0,005$); building positive class-room spirit ($t=4,39$, $p=0,001$); understanding other's position ($t=2,09$, $p=0,046$); responsible worker ($t=2,08$, $p=0,047$); peacemaker ($t=2,42$; $p=0,022$); sharing ($t=3,12$, $p=0,007$), and social team worker ($t=3,41$, $p=0,002$). There were no significant differences in the following parts of the evaluation scale: empathetic behaviour; consideration for the others; politeness; encouraging or friendlier behaviour; obedience; understanding teacher's feelings; starting working faster or working voluntarily; comforting others, and apologizing or being more honest.

According to teachers' and artists' experiences of arts-based learning, the arts has a positive, powerful social and emotional impact on learning and team work. During the study year, the learning in the classroom was more often clearly and meaningfully connected to the pupils' own experiences and feelings. They participated in planning and presenting the arts projects as group members and at the same time learned through the arts work many important social skills. Pupils created an arts product, a theatre presentation for an audience that mattered to them. The presentation took place in a cultural venue outside the school building, so it was not just for them and their teachers, but also their schoolmates, families, and communities. This performance was very important and motivated them to do it as well as they could. They used their freedom and imagination productively and responsibly. After the presentation, they received much positive feedback about the high aesthetic level of their performance. This was essential for their self-confidence and team spirit. Although teachers, artists and pupils worked a lot, they did not complain of it because the prize was a good feeling and better spirit in everyday learning situations.

6. Conclusions

Artist-teacher co-operation is an effective new tool to be further studied and developed in Finnish basic education. The music, dance and other art forms connected to drama and especially to puppet theatre seemed to be very effective in developing pupil's co-operative skills and social behaviour in the school environment. Every child needs arts education and aesthetic experiences. Learning through the arts gives opportunities for self-expression in many ways. Children need attention and space for their own expression. Artists working together with the teacher give more peace through interesting activities and personal attention in the classroom situations. This case study clearly demonstrates the significant benefits of artist-teacher co-operation building a better school environment for children.

School policymakers have to make decisions that encourage pupils' spontaneous imaginative play and recognize new ways of learning in and through the arts. Policies related to teacher training as well as artists have to be related to developing co-operation between educational and cultural areas. Artists and educators must recognize programmes that utilize arts activity to make a difference in the lives of pupils and identify best practices in learning. The results of this case study are encouraging for the development of a new kind of co-operation between schools and cultural workers. Artist-teacher-co-operation seems to be a strong tool in developing better social behaviour and through it a positive learning climate and interaction skills.

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